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# Cork Disease

The scoop on screw caps BY LANCE SPARKS

Wine has been around for 7,500 to 10,000 years — scientists dither — probably starting with the harvest of wild grapes. The juice fermented and, for thousands of years, was stored in open containers where it quickly oxygenated, turning into vinegar. Folks celebrated the new wine and mostly drank it up before it turned.

But sometime in those millennia, someone must have discovered that older wine, before going “bad” acquired interestingly complex flavors. And the search was on for ways to preserve wine and slow the effects of oxygen.

Sometime in the later centuries, along came hand-blown glass bottles; at first, these were closed using oil-soaked rags, but in the mid-1600s, someone tried corks — and they worked quite well, as long as the bottles were stored on their sides so the corks stayed wet and swollen to form a tight seal.

But corks raised problems, and winemakers tried other closures, recently with screw caps.

Not long ago a wine shopper could spy a screw cap on a bottle of wine and confidently assume that the contents were low-quality glug — not the bottle a guest should bring to a dinner party. Consumers of wine had been trained, for centuries, and many still are, to equate quality of wine with cork closures, at least as a beginning.

This is no longer true. These days a large number of wine brands — many of reliably high quality — have switched to screw caps, for a variety of reasons.

The first reason was called “cork taint” or “cork disease.” Whatever it was called, too many bottles were being returned as undrinkable, tasting nasty, like wet newspapers — and natural corks got the blame, perhaps wrongly, it might still turn out.

In any case, researchers looked frantically for the culprit and found 2,4,6-trichloroanisole, quickly abbreviated in the wine trade to TCA. Apparently, TCA was affecting as many as 7 to 8 percent of bottles, an intolerable failure rate, especially considering that 20 billion bottles were going to market with cork closures.

Producers tried various strategies — synthetic corks, plastic corks, aggregate corks, even glass stoppers. Each raised problems. Some producers turned to screw caps.

Screw tops, technically called Stelvin closures, had been used successfully on many liquids, from sodas to spirits. They had certain appealing virtues, being easy to open, cheaper than corks and seemingly able to solve the problem of TCA.

Australian wineries (notably Yalumba, a big-time producer) are credited with leading the change. New Zealand, too, started putting screw caps on their superb sauvignon blancs. In the U.S., Randall Grahm, owner of the respected and innovative Bonny Doon brand, held a satiric wake for corks.

Corks gotta go, sure; an old technology, now causing too many problems. For one, very few products require consumers to acquire special tools, even some training in the use of some of the tools, just to get the container open. And corks brought TCA.

But wait. Corks got the blame, but sleuthing showed that the real suspect was chlorine. Granted, corks were just pieces of bark, usually 70 percent from the cork forests of Portugal and Spain, and they were given a chlorine bath to kill any fungi or bugs before being used to close wine bottles. But corks were not the only source of chlorine.

Sleuthing continues. Meanwhile, don't blame the screw cap. And, as always, caveat emptor. ❖



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# Labor of Love

## *From blue pinot to sheep tended vines at Antiquum Farm*

BY RACHAEL CARNES | PHOTOS COURTESY ANTIQUUM FARM

Sitting 15 miles west of Junction City, Antiquum Farm bursts with life. In the spring, this gorgeous site, nestled in the foothills of the Coast Range, dappled with oaks and cut by Ferguson Creek, becomes a veritable farmyard nursery.

“April through June is just magical at Antiquum Farm,” owner and farmer Stephen Hagen says. “We have geese hatching, which is hysterical and a little terrifying. And right now the ewes are in their awkwardly adorable phase — all belly and skinny legs. They get really docile in the last month. It’s sweet.”

Wait — wine and geese and sheep?

“We farm our vineyard with a methodology that’s entirely our own,” Hagen says. “I call it grazing-based viticulture. These methods allow Antiquum fruit to grow in total isolation. No fertilizers, compost or foliar feed teas are used.”

Hagen’s approach borrows heavily from biodynamics — which treats soil, compost and animals as a single system — but at Antiquum, everything is happening live, in the vineyard.

“There are no compost piles or machinery required to move and distribute them,” Hagen says. “Animals are not housed in order to collect materials. Instead, they happily free-range on the site and leave behind their contributions to our cause.”

At Antiquum Farm, rotational cycles of grazing sheep, geese and hens provide all of the nutritional needs of the vineyard.

“We will start training the sheep against eating grapevines right before lambing begins,” Hagen says. “This training method allows us to graze our vineyards year-round and eliminate all other inputs.”

Hagen uses aversion training in which the sheep eat a small dose of the plant “to create a brief period of mild digestive discomfort.” He stresses that it’s imperative that alternative sources of palatable forage are constantly available for sheep to nibble.

Hagen named the winery’s two most popular varietals after his own kids, Juel (10) and Daisy (14), not just because he’s a proud dad but also because his kids play an integral role on the farm.

“We put our kids’ names on our signature pinot noir and pinot gris to honor their contribution to these wines,” Hagen says. “Juel and Daisy manage over 160 animals when they are out of school.

They work hard, and are proud of the work they do.”

Hagen says working the farm — and caring for its horses, sheep, chickens and geese — provides his kids with a sense of scale and responsibility.

“They are an important part of establishing this unique way of wine growing,” Hagen says. “I think it’s really cool that a 10 and 14-year-old are on the front lines of changing wine growing.”

Hagen and his wife Niki planted their first vines before their daughter was born. He says it took three years for the vineyard to become entirely self-sustaining and that this closed system has yielded some surprising results.

“On the third year we began to see some very peculiar things. Large amounts of the vines began mutating in their growth habits,” Hagen says. “Clusters began standing up on their stems until nearly fully mature, and the fruit uniformly changed color across the entire site.”

Hagen notes that Antiquum’s pinot is now a distinct blue color. “This is not the normal color for pinot,” he says. “But sometimes great things happen and we can’t, or don’t need to know why.”

He has a few guesses as to why the grapes are blue: Pinot noir is highly genetically unstable he says, and between isolation and a lack of industrial intrusion it “has allowed the genetic material on our sites to mutate. There is not one single clonal selection in our vineyard that now behaves in any way that might be associated with the parent material. And we see some really freaky cool things happening,” Hagen adds.

As he walks the rows at harvest time, Hagen frequently sees grape clusters that have a mix of berry colors from white to lavender.

“It was also at this point that we started seeing the most distinct thing about this site take place,” Hagen says. “Our acids began to lock up at a very high level in the ripening process.”

In other words, at Antiquum Farm acidity stops falling very early in the ripening curve, producing a wine with exquisite taste, color, aroma and mouth feel.

“Normally, one of the things that forces your hand to pick is plummeting acidity. Without those acids the wines will lack shape and focus,” Hagen says.



## ANTIQUUM FARM



HARLEY HAGEN, STEPHEN'S FATHER, SORTING GRAPES AT HARVEST WITH HIS GRANDSON JUEL



"Oftentimes, growers have to choose between mature fruit and structure. The fact that our acids hit a pH of around 3.2 and then stop falling gives us a tremendous amount of leeway to wait on full phenolic development and physical maturity."

Grazing-based viticulture also eliminates doing many passes with tractors.

"We never-rarely need to mow our vineyards. That eliminates at least five to six passes," Hagen says. "It also preserves life and limb of all the critters great and small that live in the vineyard."

"Antiquum is a site that is buzzing with life and has an emphatic presence you can feel," Hagen says.

"Often in organic agriculture, you trade herbicides for full consumption and excessive tillage," Hagen says. "Instead, Juel and Daisy concentrate and direct our hens scratching activity to the emerging weeds under the vines, by pitching scratch grains at them. It is incredibly effective and actually does a better job than mechanical cultivation."

Hagen says his method on the farm preserves organic matter, uses less fuel and reduces soil compaction.

"These methods have isolated the site and caused the vines to mutate," Hagen says. "Nothing behaves as it should. It has become a place of gorgeous anomalies. These mutations have launched the wines on a delicious and exotic tangent."

Hagen says he never expected to end up a farmer, but his early life was on this land.

"I think I'm more surprised than anyone that this is where I landed," Hagen says. "But it makes sense in retrospect."

"I had a pretty feral childhood. My parents were really great about letting us have our freedom. I was all over the country west of Junction City at a very young age," Hagen says. "When I was a kid, I trespassed all over the property we now farm. I got to know these hills on an incredibly intimate level. This place is in my flesh. I mean that in the most literal sense."

Hagen says he believes his local knowledge — and intuition — is important in agriculture.

"I think it's something that is missing, or not really respected in most growing nowadays," Hagen says. "The way we grow is all about a sense of belonging to a place. It's about what is important to us as parents and caretakers of our little corner of the planet."

Antiquum Farm is small by design.

"Our small footprint, farming methods and desire to only make estate wines predestine us to be a boutique brand," Hagen says. "I don't ever want to be making wines at a scale where they are on every corner. That just isn't who we are."

In the past 12 months, Antiquum has rolled into new domestic and international markets.

"I am really grateful to the support that Oregon and particularly Eugene has shown to our family," Hagen says. "And I am proud of the fact that we have found a way to incorporate the best parts of ourselves — and our intentions — into the way we grow these wines."

Antiquum Farm has grown five-fold over the past two vintages, from producing 385 cases per year to 2,000.

"We've done a lot of things in the vineyard that other growers told me, and continue to tell me, can't be done," Hagen says.

Antiquum is currently putting the finishing touches on a farm facility where they'll be able to host private seated tastings by appointment and winemaker's dinners.

"We aspire to a high level of hospitality and creating a more quiet and intimate experience," Hagen says.

Hagen notes that, although it's rewarding, his methods are a challenging way to farm.

"You need to want to be a well-rounded farm or a scattered individual. That's why we do it. It isn't easy, but the rewards and results are great." ❖

*Antiquum Farm has a website with a wine shop, [antiquumfarm.com](http://antiquumfarm.com). They also book private appointments at the farm. Locally, find Antiquum wines at The Broadway and Sundance Wines or in your local bottle shop. For its 2015 vintage, now available, prices range from \$20 to \$28 for the pinot gris, \$38 to \$80 for the pinot noir and \$50 to \$90 for sparkling.*

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# Urban Wine Hike

## A guide to downtown wine tastings

BY WILLIAM KENNEDY

**F**or lots of people, wine tasting means driving long distances to the countryside to bucolic wineries like King Estate or LaVelle Vineyards.

But in the center of Eugene's fermentation district is an artery of urban wineries and tasting rooms, connecting the Whiteaker neighborhood to downtown. And they're all within walking or biking distance from one another — an urban wine tour, if you will.

So *Eugene Weekly* sent an intrepid reporter out to hit the trail, taste wine and report on a fun afternoon spent in and around the heart of Eugene. Some assignments are worse than others, but we were up for the challenge.

### Territorial Vineyards and Wine Company 907 WEST 3RD

Start at Territorial Vineyard and Wine Company in the heart of the Whiteaker — Eugene's first "urban winery." Territorial features live music and events, and be sure to try the "floral, urbane and highly poised" 2014 Equinox Pinot Gris. Or spoil yourself with the "highly saturated and utterly opulent" 2013 late harvest chardonnay called "Spoiled Rotten."

### Eugene Wine Cellars 255 MADISON

At Eugene Wine Cellars, don't miss B2 Winery's dry malbec with notes of berry. Be sure to join their casual wine club, which the hostess says is "more of a mailing list." While there, doodle on your wine glass with Chalk-o-rama crayons — notice how your self-portrait changes after the second glass of not-too-sweet rosé.

### Oregon Wine Lab

488 LINCOLN, DISTANCE FROM EUGENE WINE CELLARS: .5 MILES

Oregon Wine Lab, serving William Rosé Wines, has a cool, urban feel and a massive advantage over other locations: the excellent Da Nang Vietnamese food cart. Throughout spring and summer, Da Nang serves Sunday brunch — but get there early to beat crowds and also, drink the delicious Muller Thurgau with your breakfast Bon Mi sandwich.

### Capitello Winery Tasting Room

540 CHARNELTON, DISTANCE FROM OREGON WINE LAB: .1 MILES

Founded by New Zealander Ray Walsh, Capitello offers an interesting Oregon vs. New Zealand wine flight, featuring two Sauvignon blancs — one from Oregon, one from New Zealand; notice how the local Savvy is fruity, while the New Zealand variety tastes of red pepper. Also, with The National and Joy Division on the speakers, Capitello wins in terms of ambience.

### Sweet Cheeks Winery Tasting Room

248 WEST 5TH, STE. 25, DISTANCE FROM CAPITELLO WINERY: 341 FT., DISTANCE FROM TERRITORIAL: .7 MILES

Conclude at Sweet Cheeks Tasting Room at 5th Street Market, the most tourist-y stop of the tour. While there, try a flight of Willamette Valley reds featuring a tempranillo, syrah and merlot. Notice how Willamette reds are fruit-forward but not overwhelmingly sweet. Perhaps mix with some guests from the Inn at The 5th right next door and mention the rest of the delicious stops for wine lovers right in downtown Eugene. Walk, take a cab or let your designated driver wheel your wine-mellowed self home. ❖

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# How to Read a Shelf Talker

*And other strategies for picking new wines from Wine Folly* BY VANESSA SALVIA

“I served in restaurants, and I was one of those people who asked, ‘Do you want red or white, lighter or bolder?’” says Madeline Puckette, wine blogger at Wine Folly, the site she started with her partner, Justin Hammack, six years ago in Seattle. “Figuring out what people’s sweet spot is can be useful and informative.” But, it’s also an easy path to what you typically drink rather than a map for discovering something new.

If you’ve seen an infographic about selecting wine, one that flows from you drinking it alone to buying it for people you don’t really like (in which case, says the flow chart, they don’t deserve wine), it’s probably from Wine Folly.

And if Puckette looks familiar, it’s probably because when she was a teenager growing up in Corvallis, she made a video for Lane Transit District about youth bus passes. She met Hammack while studying music in college in Los Angeles, pursuing a dream of being a rock star. “After seven years in L.A. I got burned out, and Justin and I went to Reno, Nevada, of all places,” Puckette says.

This was during the financial crisis, and she lost her job. “I walked into a wine bar to drink my sorrows away and got a job there,” she says.

Before that, Puckette tasted and collected as many different wines as she could. “I spent a lot of time trying to understand how wines tasted different from each other,” she says.

Getting to know the grape varieties is a great place to start. In 2015, Wine Folly introduced a book called *The Essential Guide to Wine*. The *New York Times* bestseller examines different grape varieties and what they tend to taste like. “The book has been a huge success because of the section on how different grape varieties taste, so you can sort of explore a grape variety that you might be curious about and then seek it out,” Puckette says. “The way that a grape turns into wine has a gestalt that carries through, that you can taste across all of the wines from that grape.”

One unusual wine she describes is *torrontés*, which grows only in Argentina. “Almost

always, no matter who makes it and no matter how dry they make it, it has an aroma of rose petals and geranium,” Puckette says. “When you learn that this wine has a rose flavor you start to think what kind of food would work with the flavor of roses and suddenly you’re getting into Middle Eastern dishes, which focus on rose water.”

When considering shelf talkers (those notes describing wines at the store) trust ones that include a flavor profile. “A shelf talker that just tells me it won a medal or where it was made doesn’t tell me anything about what it tastes like,” Puckette says.

Read enough tasting notes and you’ll learn to interpret what certain descriptors really mean. “For instance, ‘a bit grippy’ means that your lips are going to be stuck to your teeth because the tannins are so intense!” Puckette explains. “Or, ‘finishes with an herbal note.’ That is, for the most part, not a good thing for people who like ripe wines because it means it has an unripe note. They weren’t able to get full ripeness before they picked.”

Puckette encourages trying wines that are rated below 90. “People think 90 is a bare minimum but in the reviewer’s mind 90 is an excellent wine,” she says.

Wine shops and grocery stores are typically organized by growing region. “Try something from a different section each time,” Puckette advises. “And if you’re having Mexican food, or Spanish food or food from a hot climate, pick a wine from a hot climate.”

If you don’t have your menu planned, pick a region and base your menu around what else grows in that region, such as a California red with chicken and avocado. “You can concoct a dish around a glass of wine,” Puckette says. “The best time to think about wine, in my opinion, is in the context of food.”

Or, perhaps, the best time to think about drinking wine is anytime you might think about drinking something else. “For example, on a sunny day after mowing the lawn you want a cold refreshing beer,” she says. “But you could have wine instead. Maybe a cool refreshing dry rosé.” ❖





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